

A. Grundlingh, *The Dynamics of Treason: Boer Collaboration in the South African War of 1899-1902*
Protea Book House, Pretoria, 2006
532 pp
ISBN 1-86919-079-3
R195.00

There is a home-made sort of intellectual in the United States, where I come from, well known far beyond the bounds of academic history, called the “Civil War buff”. Many fascinated amateurs belong to this sort to some degree, and their cognate conflict among Afrikaners is the South African War or *Drie Jaars Oorlog*, more popularly and ineradicably called the Boer War (even if there was a previous one). So the academic historian who chooses to document and describe this defining moment in South African history had better step carefully, lest the obloquy of an entire deminution descend upon him. And how much more careful must such a historian be when approaching the sensitive subject of *hendsoppers* and *joiners*, as the original 1979 Afrikaans edition of this volume was entitled: the burghers of the Boer republics who either surrendered, fled, or actively served the British during this war.

2. A review of *The Dynamics of Treason* by Bill Nasson appeared in the previous issue of *Historia*.

The time of the writing of the original study was itself an ambiguous moment. The late 1970s witnessed the most complete control of the political situation the National Party would ever achieve, but also the aftermath of the Soweto uprising of 1976. This event shook the government of Prime Minister John Vorster, admittedly or not, to its foundations and gave warning to its leaders that they could not sleep with both eyes closed ever again. The precise and circumspect, yet assertive style of the narrative must be considered in the contexts of address to both its time and audience.

From the outset, the reader is in the hands of a superb, but modestly-spoken historian, who is respectfully cognisant of the significance to his Afrikaner readership of the reputations, even at almost eight decades' remove, of his subjects, loyal or otherwise. So Grundlingh builds, brick by evidential brick, a solid edifice for the argument that refusal to go on commando, either initially or following the surrender of Transvaal General Piet Cronjé at Paardeberg and the capture of Bloemfontein and Pretoria in the middle of 1900, or actually joining the British forces subsequently, was treason, *finish en klaar*. The very wealth of evidence marshalled in support of this argument however awakens issues and controversies that not even the assertive Grundlingh is entirely able to put to bed. Among the least of these for example, is the role of African scouts and spies in the success, much valued by the British, of the *joiners* in mapping local geographies, locating mobile commandos, and in predicting their movements and tactics.

A more crucial issue is that of the motivation and sincerity of the surrendered burghers, peace committee members, and National Scouts. Almost to a man, these *hendsoppers* and *joiners* protested that their republican political leaders had deceived them and acted out of overweening pride and self-serving lust for money and power; that their own motivations were to bring an end to a hopeless and self-destructive conflict with a thoroughly determined great power, and to end the pointless, horrific and piteous suffering of combatants and non-combatants alike, in particular the Afrikaner women and children. Grundlingh will have none of this. He sedulously attributes their motivations to frustrated personal ambitions, headstrong political fractiousness, and the desire to preserve family estates, personal property, or to enjoy personal liberty, safety or material reward. He may indeed be correct, even though as the Igbo people of Nigeria say, "The heart is not a carry-bag, that you can just shove your hand in it".

Indeed, when we come to the fascinating final chapters on "Afrikaner disunity after the war" and "Reconciliation in Afrikaner ranks", we find that those who retained real political influence among the *volk* after the war, based on their determination to fight until the last day of May 1902 – the *bitterreinders* – often demanded confession of and repentance for the sin of treason as price of reconciliation and re-acceptance. Certainly at first, almost all the *hendsoppers* and *joiners* refused to do any such thing. In some cases they gave as good as they got, scolding their righteous opponents, who blamed them for their defeat as stubborn, misguided fools who had brought their people to grief. One National Scout who spurned the attempts of his local church to get him to admit to a "breach of moral conduct" went so far as to express the ultimate sacrilege and "say that the *bitterreinders* were responsible for the deaths of the women and children in the concentration camps" (p 417). Yet for all their protestations of humanitarian sincerity, surely the defectors should have recognised that their actions would entail

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the sacrifice of their good name and influence in society at large, and a future as prophets without honour among Afrikaners. If the welfare of their people were their overriding concern, then their vocal complaints of contemptuous treatment by both the *bittereinder* majority and the British colonial administration after the war, appear hypocritical and self-serving. Indeed, when a number of fervent public and private confessions, apologies, and prayers for forgiveness were finally made, a number of these appear to have been motivated by a worried desire to be reincorporated into mainstream Afrikaner society after the British administration had left their war-time supporters to their own devices. Thereby hang more than one tale that has in the end far greater implications than the famous acts of betrayal, endlessly brooded over by Afrikaners ever since, themselves.

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